Medical translation: "It has to be done with precision"

Elvira Stahl

Medical translation is the most complex of arts. A German physician discovered this recently when his paper dealing with new implant materials for hip and knee prostheses was translated into English by a pharmaceutical company's translator.

"As soon as I looked over the first page, I knew it was a disaster," he told me. "Surely the translator had medical dictionaries at his disposal?"

Unfortunately, dictionaries will never be completely up to date, and even if the English equivalents they provide are correct linguistically, they may not be the terms physicians actually use.

That doctor had assumed that someone used to translating information about drugs would be familiar with terminology relating to surgical procedures. In this case the translator was expected to be familiar with the use of new implant materials.

The late Dr. Felix Marti-Ibañez, a physician and medical historian and one-time editor of *MD* magazine, once commented on the translator's work in an essay, *The Splendor and Misery of Translation.*

"Translation is a utopian task," he wrote, "yet it is of worldwide importance. Rhythm and euphony in translation are as important as the meaning of the words and phrases. The greatest praise we can pay a translator is to say, 'you cannot tell that this is a translation.' "

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Father Ronald Knox, a translator of the Bible, wrote a book on the subject, *The Trials of a Translator.* He discussed the translator's tribulations and the many forms a single biblical sentence or phrase could take. These same trials confront the medical translator.

Changes in medicine occur constantly, and translators must keep up with them. New medical terms — the World Health Organization estimates that several thousand are created annually — present enormous problems for translators. They might be needed to describe new techniques or materials, or they might result from the reclassification of diseases or the renaming of viruses.

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A project launched in 1984 by the Medical Research Council of Canada, in collaboration with the Terminology and Documentation Branch of the Department of the Secretary of State, helps illustrate the size of the terminology and translation problem.

"Current deficiencies in

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health science terminology have had certain untoward effects on health science and health care," the council reported. "In an era of linguistic and instant information exchange, these deficiencies are likely to result in even greater communication problems in the future."

The project was designed to promote the use of accurate and uniform medical terms in English and French. The first volume, *Signs and Symptoms*, was published in 1986 and contained 355 pages of bilingual medical terms. The volume, since revised and updated, now covers 426 pages.

The importance of computers is growing in almost all aspects of medicine, but I doubt that they will ever replace translators, especially medical ones. Rachel Lévy, who heads her own translation service in Montreal, agrees. "The computer just cannot make subtle distinctions," she says.

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"I have an example," one colleague told me. "A computer translated 'France, the matchless country' as 'La France, un pays sans alumettes' [France, a country without matches]."

Lévy maintains that computers are indispensable in providing word banks or standard phrases, but computerized translations will always have to be checked and revised by a human.

Translation is an intimately personal business. "Professional vehemence is never more emotionally and intensely displayed than among translators," Marti-Ibañez wrote. "I have attended many meetings of literary and medical translators and I witnessed many verbal battles over a nuance, an interpretation, or a version of this or that particular word or sentence. Professional translators possess a strong sense of ownership with regard to what they translate, sometimes even greater than the original author's.

"Very much like a delicate surgery, translation consists of extracting ideas from the original and grafting them on to the new language while they are still throbbing with life. It has to be done with precision."■